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Is Shakespeare Still in the Holler? The Death of a Language Myth

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1. Introduction

A myth is a popular belief or tradition that is of only imaginary or unverifiable truth that serves to present the worldview of a given group of people who hold the belief. One of the most famous myths about Appalachian speech is that speakers of this variety sound like Shakespeare, Chaucer, or some other great English literary icon.[1] This view of Appalachian speech is a long-standing, powerful, and romantic cultural vision of Appalachia, and it has been called "one of the hardier cultural beliefs or myths in the collective American psyche" (Montgomery 1999: 66). The reason for its hardiness, as Montgomery explains, lies in the fact that it creates an origin story for a rather young America. The myth, in its most traditional sense, paints the picture of an isolated people, untouched by the outside world, living in an idyllic mountain time gone by (Montgomery 1999).

Therefore, the myth serves to associate positive qualities with a region which has struggled "to combat the distorted, negative images of mountain people popularized in the press" (Montgomery 1999: 69). In this paper, however, I argue that it appears that those negative images have triumphed in many ways over the romanticized Shakespearian myth. The focus in this paper is on survey results that suggest not only do people not know the myth but also see it as a ludicrous depiction of Appalachian speech. In the interpretation of the results, I discuss how, seemingly separate from many linguists' debunking efforts, nonlinguists show rejection of the myth and full acceptance of the very common negative stereotypes associated with Appalachian speech specifically and with Appalachia as a whole.

2. Origin of the Myth

The Shakespearian myth likely has its origins in the late 19th century, though its timing is quite unclear. Early examples, like that of Berea College president William Goodell Frost in an address called "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" (1899), presented below, served to connect the speech of the mountains to a previous time, thus indicating that the speech, which might be, as he claims, perceived as a "degradation," belongs, in fact, to "polite lips" but is maintained by the mountain students of his college.

> The rude language of the mountains is far less a degradation than a survival. The [Old English] pronoun 'hit' holds its place almost universally. Strong past tenses, 'holp' for helped, 'drug' for dragged, and the like, are heard constantly; and the syllabic plural is retained in words ending in -st and others. The greeting as we ride up to a cabin is 'Howdy, strangers. 'Light and hitch your beastes.' Quite a vocabulary of Chaucer's words, which have been dropped by polite lips but which linger in these solitudes, has been made out by some of our students. (Frost 1899)

His words provide an interesting juxtaposition, but the purpose of such an expression by a university president appears to do more than prop up the language he seems to value despite this perceived rudeness. It also served to connect life in Appalachia to the times of the nation's forefathers, creating a sort of origin story for America. Such an origin story, one that connects English in America to people like Shakespeare and, as in this example, Chaucer, also serves to create a specific kind of origin story in which preference is given to those seen as being of Anglo-Saxon heritage.

Other early examples took similar tactics. In an article called "Elizabethan America," Charles Morrow Wilson (1929) takes Frost's "polite lips" and turns them into "cavaliers and curtsies," thus squarely connecting Appalachia to a proper time, again choosing to remind readers that Appalachian speech is an enduring version of Elizabethan English, not a ruining of American English.

> We know a land of Elizabethan ways—a country of Spenserian speech, Shakespearian people, and of cavaliers and curtsies. It is a land of high hopes and mystic allegiances, where one may stroll through the forests of Arden and find heaths and habits like those of olden England....The speech of the Southern mountains is a survival of the language of older days, rather than a degradation of the United States English…a surprisingly large number of old words have survived, along with a surprisingly large number of old ways, giving a quaint and delightful flavor of olden English. (Wilson 1929)

Such remarks present the notion of an idyllic, unchanged mountain speech and way of life. Calling such speech and ways "quaint" and "delightful" serve to highlight something positive in an area that has quite often seen a good deal of neglect and denigration. In fact, it has been suggested (Montgomery 1999) that these romantic images of Appalachia were created by outsiders who, having found some reason to be in Appalachia, often as educators, clergymen, or members of the media, learned from their experiences with Appalachians that the speech and ways of life were not as bad as the popular stereotypes would have led them to believe prior to such an experience, and they felt a need to paint a prettier picture. As it were, in time, many Appalachians themselves came to accept and believe in this myth. In a sense, this acceptance most clearly serves the role of protecting one's own language and culture from intrusion or perversion from outsiders, both in terms of perception and production.

The myth continues to be present in today's society, at least to some degree. The topic is presented, discussed, and debated on blogs, like the Tumblr blog created by a graduate student named Karissa called "Self-Contradictions are Valid." In one such post, Karissa explores the myth, which she, as an outsider, claims to have never heard prior to reading Montgomery's (1999) attempt to debunk the myth. She is most concerned, as she says in her own words, with "the conflicting ideologies" of the "backwards" stereotype and the "pure Elizabethan" myth, claiming that such a juxtaposition serves to "apply the noble savage trope" to the Appalachian people from the perspective of the outsider ("Self-Contradictions" 2011).

One of the more recent revivals of the myth can be seen in the work of Zell Miller, a former U.S. Senator from Georgia, who has written several books of Appalachian nostalgia, in which he laments the loss of many cultural products of Appalachia in the modern day. In his most recent book, *Purt Nigh Gone* (2009), he includes a chapter on "A Disappearing Dialect," in which he claims that

> [t]he Appalachian dialect has been termed everything from Elizabethan tongue to 'hillbilly-speak.' More often than not, it has been disparaged and ridiculed as a primitive language…The truth is that mountain dialect is a unique manner of oral communication that largely, but not completely, stems from the same archaic English in which Geoffrey Chaucer told his ribald tales in the fourteenth century and William Shakespeare penned his classic[s]…some 200 years later. (Miller 2009: 89)

Miller suggests that the dialect is dying because of the introduction of radio, television, highways, and tourists in the area, suggesting that Shakespeare would have felt at home in 18th and 19th century Appalachia, but not in today's Appalachia.

Miller's lament seems to highlight the fact that the negative stereotypes that the myth set out to reject are still available today, perhaps even to a greater extent than when this myth arose. The advent of new technologies like the internet, the broad, expansive use of tools like social media websites, and the representations of "reality" on television and movies, for example, serve to propagate the same tired stereotypes at a grander level than what could have possibly been accomplished or even imagined at the time of Frost's address.

For example, movies like the Patrick Swayze's 1989 thriller *Next of Kin* paint the picture of Appalachians as lawless, snake-handling, shotgun-toting, revenge-seeking hillbillies. Probably the most (in)famous Hollywood example of Appalachian stereotypes can be found in the 1972 film *Deliverance*. This movie, which was nominated for three Oscars and numerous Golden Globes, portrays an Appalachia that is more than simply dangerous; the Appalachian characters in this film, thought to represent generations of inbreeding, threaten the lives of four outsiders,

further propagating the notion of a purposefully isolated, vengeful, and ignorant community.

"Reality" television, it turns out, may be one of the worst propagators of such negative stereotypes, and not just of Appalachians. The reductive vision of New Jersey portrayed in MTV's *Jersey Shore*, for example, was adored by fans across the country but infuriated Italian-Americans with its use of the word "Guido" (Brooks 2009). Continuing in this tradition, in 2012, MTV premiered *Buckwild*, a show following the lives of West Virginia teens, amid controversy involving West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin and his claims that the show "plays to ugly, inaccurate stereotypes about the people of West Virginia," calling for the show's cancellation (Moaba 2012).

What is most noticeable in this brief exploration of myths and stereotypes associated with Appalachia is that there is a clear contradiction: Appalachians are both proper like Shakespeare and rude like savages. And while the popular impressions of Appalachians and their culture might trickle down into interpretations of their speech, linguists, who tend toward more objective accounts of language, find that the verity of the myth is secondary to an analysis of the kinds of linguistic structures found in the variety. In what follows, I briefly discuss how the Shakespearean myth has been preserved by nonlinguists through rudimentary examinations of language data and explore some of what linguists have to say about the myth.

3. Exploring the Language

Many of the quotes above that proclaim the verity of the Shakespearean myth draw on real language data to support their claims. Typically, the focus in these analyses is on specific verb forms, like *clum* for *climbed* or *holp* for *helped*, as seen in both Frost's and Wilson's depictions. Others focus on expressions like *purt nigh gone* (Miller 2009) and words like *bumblings* (Kephart 1913), *yonder*, and *afeared*. Some of these expressions and features indeed have roots in Elizabethan (or other earlier) times. For example, Wolfram and Christian (1976) note that expressions like *right much* and *right worthy* do appear in the writings of

Shakespeare. These expressions have disappeared from most other varieties of American English, marking them as conservative features in Appalachian speech. These occurrences, however, are somewhat rare (Montgomery 2006).

Other than noting that the remnants of Elizabethan speech in Appalachia are rare, linguists have done little in the way of actually trying to verify the myth's reality. Linguists know that all languages change, all the time, thus there can be no language that has been untouched by time. Also, in exploring the analyses that provide evidence in favor of the myth, linguists would say that the evidence is minimal and not systematic, preferring to see the language, which linguists recognize Appalachian English to be, as a whole system.

The problem with many of the arguments in favor of the Shakespearean myth, however, is that they rarely, if ever, present complete, systematic analyses to show exactly how Shakespearean the language really is (or is not). For example, in Miller's analysis of why Appalachian English really is Elizabethan, he provides a simple list of several words, with no mention of the systematicity of the variety. Many focus on the multitude of items that show the historic connection instead of pointing to patterns. Miller highlights the more than 800 items discussed in Kephart's (1913) work as evidence, providing his own additional list. However, few studies in this vein would point to the systematic ways in which the features are used. For example, many linguists have studied the rather common Appalachian feature of *a*-prefixing, as in "I was a-washing the car," determining that this phenomenon only happens in certain, specific linguistic environments, ones that are predictable and regular (for more discussion on *a*-prefixing and Appalachian speech in general, see Wolfram and Christian 1976).

Linguistic analyses often involve very sophisticated methods, ones that Miller sees as reductive. While Miller acknowledges the stereotypes that are prevalent in the media, he complains that those of us who study Appalachian English from a sociolinguistic perspective act as "the elitist side of the 'Snuffy Smith' coin'" (Miller 2009: 90). Thus, the analyses of linguists have been met with scorn from those who continue to cherish the Shakespearean myth.

This kind of resistance means that other problems with the myth are seemingly ignored as well. For example, it seems almost nonsensical to refer both to Shakespeare and Chaucer as the language models for Appalachian speech, as these two writers lived in very different time periods. Additionally, when Miller suggests that Appalachians have also been innovative but fails to see the contradiction in his claims of maintaining Elizabethan English and his claims of innovation, it is clear that certain kinds of data are being put aside in favor of the data that connect to the myth.

One linguist, Michael Montgomery, took on the task of discussing the myth's lack of linguistic viability when he wrote a chapter for Bauer and Trudgill's (1999) book titled *Language Myths*. Yet, despite the fact that part of the purpose of the article was to debunk the myth, Montgomery's work is cited in reference to the origin of Appalachian English widely on the internet, including Wikipedia and English language Q&A blogs. Montgomery's own work (cf. 1995, 2006, 2013) has had its focus on the Scots-Irish heritage of Appalachian speech. Some have conflated these notions, calling Appalachian speech "a sort of Scottish-flavored Elizabethan English" (Dial 1969). Others still continue to ignore Montgomery's claims. For example, a Smith Mountain Lake (VA) online news story glorified the Elizabethan status of Appalachian English, further indicating how little is thought of the expert status of linguists (Lauterstein 2010).

It seems, then, that linguists are not the ones who have the right kind of knowledge about this myth. In this paper, therefore, I have turned to nonlinguists, in order to see if the myth itself has traction and currency among people today. The perspective, then, is not so much on the language itself but on the interpretations of a myth about the language. As will become clear, people have a very hard time reconciling the juxtaposition of Shakespeare with the more widely held cultural beliefs that are so prevalent in the media today, making the Shakespearean myth seem like a dead myth.

4. Data and Methodology

To show what I mean by a dead myth, I provide survey data that highlights how little known this myth is. The survey data come from an assignment on language myths completed by students in three separate classes (two classes on American English, one class on Appalachian English). Students were instructed to survey 20 people about certain myths about language, including, aside from the Shakespearean one, items like "double negatives are illogical" and "some languages have no grammar." The surveys included questions about whether the respondent had ever heard the myth, who they had heard say it, and whether they thought it was true.

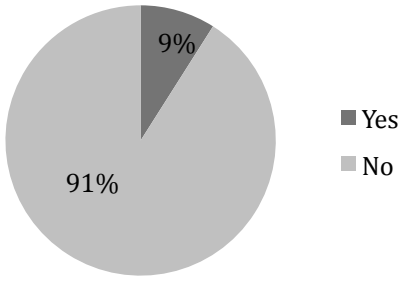
One caveat about the data collection is that, in the American English classes, students were not required to use the Shakespearean myth, whereas students in the Appalachian English class were. In total, more than 60 students chose/asked respondents about this myth. There were 1223 total responses to the questions about this myth.

Unfortunately, because of the nature of the assignment, I do not have the exact data of who these respondents are. Based on the populations of my classes, however, one can safely assume that the majority of the respondents are white, college-aged people from Kentucky.[2] It is also likely that, because they are from Kentucky, a good portion of the respondents are either from Appalachia or have encountered people from Appalachia. Therefore, what is to follow in the data analysis is likely based on at least some vague "real world" knowledge, not just stereotypes about Appalachia. But, as I will suggest, the "real world" knowledge and the Shakespeare myth seem to lose in the battle against some of the worst stereotypes about the region.

5. Results

Students were instructed to first ask respondents if they had ever heard a statement (not a myth) like "Appalachians sound like Shakespeare." As evidenced by Figure 1, only 111 respondents (9%) claimed to have ever heard such a statement, while 1112 respondents (91%) had never heard it.

Figure 1. "Have You Heard This Myth?"



Overwhelmingly, people claimed to have heard the myth from older, rural people, mostly older relatives. This fact perhaps suggests either a connection to traditional ways exhibited by older people or some sort of expert knowledge accorded to older people because of their age. Other myth propagators included preachers, academic team coaches, English and history teachers, college professors, drama teachers, books, the media, ignorant people, and bartenders. Some respondents suggested that only Appalachians say this. Still others have heard the myth from less concrete sources like society, people, friends, and family, or indicate its unclear origin by including statements like "just know it from somewhere" and "always heard it."

In my students' analyses of the data, there were some interesting insights about the respondents and their knowledge. Some students claimed that the only ones who had heard the myth were actually from Appalachia, thus using the statement as is expected – as a way of venerating their way of speaking. Others found vehement rejection of the statement, with participants saying things like "I've been to Appalachia, and they don't sound like Shakespeare." Some students suggested that perhaps the data reveals little because some of their respondents are not very knowledgeable about Appalachia. For example, some students suggested that their respondents did not know where Appalachia was located and that respondents displayed a general lack of

understanding of the history of the area, claiming "People do not know that people from Appalachia have roots in England/Scotland/Ireland."

In an earlier version of the assignment, some students also asked respondents to provide one word evoked by a statement like "Appalachians sound like Shakespeare." The words themselves are quite enlightening. These words included the following: confusing, weird, ridiculous, odd, far-fetched, nonsense/nonsensical, subjective, uninformed, judgmental, uncertain, unsure, wrong, silly, hilarious, inaccurate, unjustifiable, false, lacking, backwards, ignorant, and humorous. Some respondents simply answered this question with laughter. Others could not limit their responses to one word, with one particularly vocal respondent saying, "These no-teeth racists sound more like my grandpa than a historical poet/play write *(sic)*."

Overwhelmingly, whether the respondent had heard the myth or not, people did not tend to believe that this statement could be true, as evidenced by the one word answers above. Again, due to the nature of the assignment, I cannot provide concrete numbers for who did and did not think the statement was true, as students interpreted the assignment in varying ways, such that some provided data on the verity of the statement for every respondent, while others only did so for the ones who had heard it. Those respondents who did say that they thought it was true felt like their own experiences with Shakespeare made them think of Appalachia. Others thought that the (perceived) isolation of Appalachians might lead to retention of older English forms.

6. Discussion

Clearly, the respondents in this study had very strong reactions about the myth. The most strongly held and frequently voiced opinion was that such a myth was "ridiculous." I was curious as to how respondents could come to this sort of interpretation. Many respondents highlighted the long time gap between Shakespeare's time and today as a reason for seeing such a statement as absurd. This reasoning actually shows an understanding of the linguistic principle that all languages are ever-changing. Some respondents

could clearly perceive the dichotomy of the negative stereotypes and this myth, claiming that the myth was likely used only by non-Appalachians "to mock us from Appalachian Kentucky."

Other respondents made very difficult to understand claims. One respondent curiously claimed that "Shakespeare wasn't even American," perhaps indicating something similar to the claim about the time gap between Shakespeare and today, though it is unclear what being American would necessarily have to do with having an influence on a dialect. Another respondent wrote that "Those people don't even know who Shakespeare is," obviously opting for the uneducated stereotype of Appalachians over the more sophisticated version.

It is, in fact, this last quote that sums up how the respondents in this study approach their understanding of Appalachia. People seemed to be surprised, even shocked, at the possibility of this myth's verity because of the positivity people see in Shakespeare and the negativity they associate with Appalachia. For these respondents, Shakespeare represents proper, eloquent, romantic, and sophisticated language; Appalachian English, on the other hand, is dumb, country, southern, uneducated, and redneck. One respondent even made the juxtaposition, saying, "Shakespeare spoke really fancy and eloquently and people from Appalachia speak more country." Therefore, the sophisticated perception associated with Shakespeare draws a sharp contrast with what most people assume to be the backwards and ignorant reality of Appalachia.

7. Conclusions

I hesitate to propose that the notion is completely gone, as even my survey results suggest it can be utilized. The myth seems to exist for some respondents as a nostalgic notion, still related to the origin story Montgomery discussed. It perhaps still has some level of political power, as the early quote from William Goodell Frost and even the more recent chapter from Zell Miller's book show. A more thorough examination of the particular sentiments of Appalachians themselves, however, might reveal that the notion is alive and well. It seems, though, looking beyond wherever we

might delimit Appalachia, people seem to see *Deliverance*, not *Hamlet*.

The results of this study suggest that negative stereotypes of Appalachian speech are alive and well, regardless of the more romantic notions in the myth. A good deal of linguistic research has dealt with the ramifications of stereotypes (both good and bad) on both the perceptions people hold about others and the actual performance of language. We know that stereotypes help people in navigating their social worlds. Therefore, knowing more about linguistic stereotypes can aid in our understanding of how speakers "bring their beliefs about language to bear on their solutions to linguistic problems" (Preston 1993: 252).

NOTES

[1] Appalachian speech has also been described as *Elizabethan*.

[2] Other data collected with a similar methodology but with the inclusion of demographic data also provides evidence to support this claim.

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